

FROST IN THE GROVE

One house for sale, no improvements allowed.



BY DAVID WALTERS

Picture a warm February day in old Coconut Grove. A gray-haired man works in his garden, tending his fruit trees — planting, watering, spreading ashes from his old trash fires around them. The pine trees sway overhead in the winter breeze. The sky is deep blue. The sun is hot. He once wrote his grandson to tell him that he gets more heat in the winter in Florida than during the entire summer back home in Vermont. The man probes the thin South Florida soil with a rod, searching for a hole in the limestone that lies close to the surface, where he can plant another orange tree. It's not a type of farming that this particular farmer is accustomed to. He needs instructions from his neighbor on how to coax fruit from the thin, sandy soil, but he wants to learn. He wants to be called a Florida farmer. He wants to add it to his list of avocations. He would add it after Vermont farmer. And after poet.

Robert Frost, at home, at "Pencil Pines." The quiet, secluded acreage with its two New England-styled cottages, located in what is now part of South Miami, has been designated a historical site which means that it cannot be substantially altered. Paradoxically, however, the five-acre homestead is also up for sale: \$295,000 for a poet's home, with its rhythms, ghosts and memories.

It cost the poet \$400 an acre in 1940.

He was then in his late 60s, a recent widower and recovering from an operation. He visited Key West and toyed with the idea of buying there, but discarded it. However, while visiting with old friend Hervey Allen, the author of *Anthony Adverse*, at his home in the "Glades," the poet decided to purchase property nearby. When Allen called him to tell him of a pineland lot within easy walking distance, Frost decided to buy it sight unseen.

Frost began working at the Florida farm in January 1941. He named the spot "Pencil Pines." He had ordered two New England-style prefabricated cottages from a northeastern company on the advice of Allen who had used the same type of housing. While waiting for the sections of house to be delivered, Frost lived nearby, filling his days with work at the farm, clearing the oak and palmetto underbrush, planting citrus, avocado, banana, mango and loquat trees.

The wood-frame houses arrived later that year via railroad flat car. They were assembled by a local carpenter, with Frost's next-door neighbor, Elmer Hjort, advising. The houses were delivered without building plans and when completed there was a bucket of bolts left over. They were stored away underneath the houses to confound later tenants.

The two clapboard cottages were raised facing each other across a grassy courtyard where roses, jasmine, phlox and periwinkles were planted. During the winter months the bushes were filled with hummingbirds. The cottages were painted white, with dark green shutters. They were washed, religiously, once a year. A white picket fence with north and south gates joined the two cottages, blue

thunbergia grew over one archway. The east cottage contained a kitchen, a bedroom, a bath and a livingroom. In the '50s a screened porch was added. This cottage housed his secretary, Kathleen Morrison, during the poet's winter visits to Florida. This was where the poet ate his meals and entertained his friends, poets and writers like, Hervey Allen, Lawrence Thompson and John Ciardi. Frost, however, stayed in the west house. It was very small and simple; it consisted of two bedrooms with a hall and a bathroom in between. One bedroom had a wood-burning stove; one morning Frost opened it up to build a fire and found instead it was home for an owl.

Over the years, Frost the poet-farmer-tinkerer added some other changes. A garage was built to the south of one cottage and a small pond was built to the north between three pine trees. Papyrus and waterlilies were planted in the pond. A horseshoe driveway was wrapped around the houses. Frost wrote: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall . . ." He spent much of his time constructing a limestone rock wall that surrounded the entire compound — save for a gap at the driveway and a gap on the path that led to his neighbors, the Hjorts.

When Frost's daughter Lesley married University of Miami professor Joseph Ballantine, Frost gave the couple a section of "Pencil Pines" as a wedding present. She designed and built a home there. But relations between the father and daughter were sometimes stormy and Frost eventually built a wall between his houses and hers. The wall wasn't built on the property line, but 25 feet inside, closer to the two cottages, leaving an odd sort of No Man's Land of pines, palmettos and Florida holly between the two properties. Frost himself planted the holly next to the stone fence. The poet was greatly displeased when, a few years later, the daughter sold her property.

He didn't, however, build a fence when his in-laws through his grandson's marriage built a house on a back section of the acreage. The last change Frost made at "Pencil Pines" took place in the early '60s when a wall in the cottage Frost lived in was knocked out to create a new livingroom. The old wood-burning stove was boarded up and a new fireplace and chimney installed. But the poet was only to use this new space for a solitary season.

In early 1962, Frost arrived at "Pencil Pines" in ill health. His condition worsened after he strolled around the yard following a rain and caught a chill. This turned into pneumonia and he was hospitalized at Baptist Hospital for several weeks. After recovering from the worst of the illness, he returned to "Pencil Pines" to convalesce for a month in the company of his secretary and two practical nurses. He spent his days reviewing the final proofs for his new volume of poetry: *In The Clearing*. In March of that year he left "Pencil Pines" for the final time. He traveled north to Washington, D.C. for a celebration of his 88th birthday. He died a year later. ■

HEDY FREDERICKS is a freelance writer.

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